

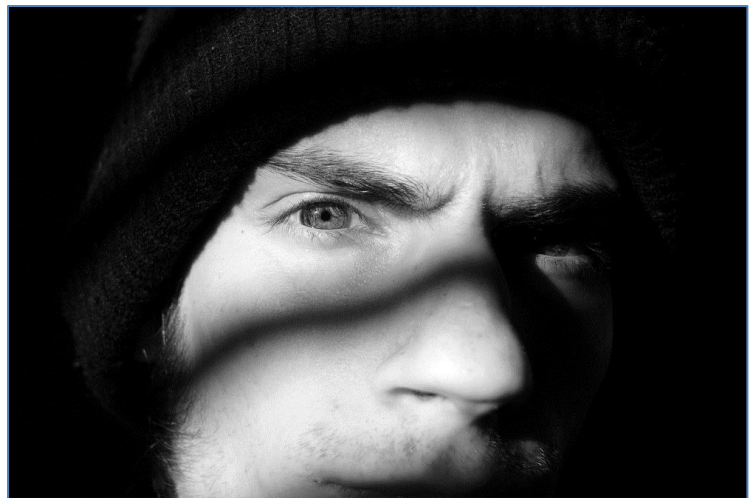
Research Briefing N° 99

Heartless and cunning? The relationship between intelligence, psychopathic traits and antisocial behaviour in adolescents

This study examined two main questions:

- 1) Is there a direct link between psychopathic traits and intelligence?
- 2) Is the combination of psychopathic traits and high IQ related to more severe antisocial behaviour in adolescents?

Key words: callous-unemotional traits; psychopathy; intelligence; antisocial behaviour; cognitive ability



Key findings

Findings are of particular interest to researchers and clinicians in child and adolescent mental health.

- Psychopathic traits were not associated with verbal IQ scores (intelligence quotient – derived from standardised tests to assess intelligence).
- Narcissism was related to *lower* nonverbal IQ.
- Callous-unemotional (CU) traits and impulsivity were not related to nonverbal intelligence.
- The above findings held even when accounting for the potential influence of gender, socio-demographic disadvantage, antisocial behaviour and hyperactivity.
- The combination of psychopathic traits and higher verbal or nonverbal ability was not related to more severe antisocial behaviour.
- CU traits, narcissism and hyperactivity were associated with more severe antisocial behaviour.
- Study findings contradict the widely held view that psychopathic traits are associated with better than average verbal or nonverbal intelligence.

What we did

Psychopathy is a multifaceted construct characterised by low empathy, guilt and emotionality (CU traits), egocentricity, superficial charm and a manipulative interpersonal style (narcissism), and impulsivity. In early conceptualisations, psychopaths were viewed as rational, competent and highly intelligent with good reasoning skills. The idea of the highly intelligent or 'elite' psychopath has been perpetuated through film, television and literature, producing many of our all-time favourite villains.

However, some studies have found links between psychopathy and average or good intelligence, and others to below average intelligence. These inconsistent findings may be due to differential relations between the different dimensions of psychopathy and different forms of intelligence (e.g., verbal and nonverbal ability). For example, there is some research supporting a link between narcissism and verbal ability, however a link between IQ scores and CU traits has been absent or even associated with lower IQ scores. This has intuitive appeal, especially when considering that narcissistic features of psychopathy including the ability to charm, manipulate and deceive others for one's own personal gain, appear to require good intelligence, particularly verbal ability.

Further information

For further information please see the following article:

Allen, J. L., Briskman, J., Humayun, S., Dadds, M. R. & Scott, S. (in press). Heartless and cunning? Intelligence in adolescents with antisocial behavior and psychopathic traits. *Psychiatry Research*.

How we did it

The study included 361 adolescents aged 9-18 years and their parents. Four groups of adolescents at varying degrees of risk for antisocial behaviour were included:

1. Adolescents recruited from youth offending teams ('very high risk').
2. Adolescents who participated in a long-term follow-up of a treatment trial for behaviour problems for families attending child and adolescent mental health services ('high risk').
3. Adolescents who participated in a long-term follow-up of a treatment trial for children screened for behaviour problems in primary schools ('moderate risk').
4. Adolescents from schools with no significant antisocial behaviour ('normative risk').

Parents completed questionnaires assessing adolescent psychopathic traits, hyperactivity, antisocial behaviour and family information (e.g. ethnicity, parent education). Adolescents completed the Wechsler Abbreviated Intelligence Scales which assess verbal intelligence (e.g. vocabulary), and nonverbal intelligence (e.g. visuo-spatial ability).

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